

The Battle Within



Romans 7:15-24 "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate . . . I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do . . . So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am!"

As I passed by the mirror on my dresser the other day, I caught a glimpse out of the corner of my eye of a familiar face

in the glass looking back at me. But the face which I saw in the mirror, was, for a moment, not my own face at all --- it was my father's face I thought I saw! And I felt within me a sudden rush of panic and distress at the sight, before I could shake off the mistaken identity and confirm that it was really only my face that was looking back at me in the mirror.

This has happened to me before, in sidelong glances as I pass by the reflection upon the windowpanes of the shops in the marketplace. And it has been occurring more frequently of late. And I am always momentarily disturbed by the experience. But why? What is it that is so unsettling about the idea that I might look like my father?

Part of the disquiet, I am sure, is simply that it means that I am getting older, and my hair has turned white, and that I am looking more and more like my father looked to me when I was younger and still living at home. Part of it also is perhaps a fear of losing my identity, a sudden loss of my own individuality. But it is more than that, I think.

For there is also a large part of me that does not want to be like my father; that wants to be someone else. As a young man, I did not agree with my father's politics and his views about life. I struggled at times with his set of values and beliefs. I was defiant in my youth. I wanted to find my own way in life. So during college, as I have noted before, I became a

longhaired, barefoot, vegetarian, philosophy major to perhaps distinguish myself from my parents. And as a young adult I suspect that I chose the priesthood for my vocation and not the business world as my father wished for me, as an unconscious protest of some kind. I rebelled. I was different than my father. And I was glad of it.

But as I have gotten older and more mature, I realize that I am still haunted by a likeness to my father. And when I am honest with myself, I see that I am more like him than I want to be. I realize that there is an emotional distance and coldness in me at times that I learned from him. I am aware that I inherited his aloofness with people, and his fear of intimacy. It is my father who also taught me how to be demeaning of others and their opinions with a quick wit. But, I also remember the pain and hurt that I felt as an adolescent when he could not draw close to me when I needed him, or when he turned his cynicism on my youthful dreams and ideals.

Thus, I am utterly shocked and horrified at times when I find myself saying to my children the very things that my father once said to me, and which I swore to myself that I would never ever say to my kids. But my words and actions and patterns of relating to people often happen before I am even aware of them, before I can stop them. And I sometimes see in the eyes of my

children, or my friends, or colleagues, the same pain and hurt that I remember so well as a young man.

There is a great struggle going on within me, as I suspect that there is within each of us, a battle between being who we want to be and acknowledging who we really are. For we all want to be good and loving and caring individuals, don't we? We all want to be sensitive, compassionate, courageous, and patient, and kind. So why aren't we? Why aren't we those things? What's stopping us from becoming the people we want to be? Why do we so often do, not what we want, but the very things we hate? There is a great struggle going on within each of us, a struggle which requires a brutal honesty about ourselves if we are to uncover and understand and change the patterns of our lives, which we have learned unconsciously, instinctively, and undeniably.

Oh, we *can* make changes. Each of us has, I suspect. I know that I am in many ways different than my father. I cannot, for instance, ever recall my father being able to tell his children that he loved them, but I know that I consciously went out of my way to tell each of my children repeatedly how much I love and value them. I even feared at times that I say it so much and so often that it will lose its meaning.

But I also know that sometimes even when we think that we are making progress, we are not. I can trace a drastic change in my personality, for instance, from the learned cold and cutting

philosophical cynicism of my youth to the more bemused sarcasm of the present. But I am still not where I want to be. I want to feel close to people and yet I know that sarcasm is still a means of distancing myself from others, it is still a protection from becoming too emotionally involved. And simply acknowledging that is not enough to change it.

"I can will what is right, but I cannot do it," Paul writes to the Romans. And I imagine that we can all sympathize with his words. For it takes so much effort to change; so much energy and time and honesty. It requires a great deal of diligence, and concentration, and self-reflection upon our actions and our motives and our personal history. And we would all really rather just get on with our lives, but then what is more important in our lives than this? To become the kind of people we want to be demands conscious struggle and discipline. And oh, how we hate struggles and discipline.

It is so much easier to ignore our personal weaknesses and foibles, and to concentrate only on appearances, adjusting only our masks and our glittering images, and not ourselves. It is easier to deny the truth, to look the other way when it is painful to be honest about ourselves. It is so much easier to blame others for the way we are, to blame our parents, or our spouses, or even our children for making us what we are. Or to

blame some incident in our lives, to make ourselves victims in this struggle, and not the victors.

It is easier to give up in this endless struggle within ourselves, especially since we know that we shall never win the battle completely, it is a losing struggle that we are fighting. For we know that in the end, we cannot save ourselves; that we all stand in need of a Savior. But "thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" writes Paul. For with His grace, we can succeed. We can change; we can become the people God wants us to be. We can put an end to some of the repeating patterns of hurt and sorrow and pain and abuse that are so often passed down in our selves and in families, generation to generation. We can make the world a better place for our children and our friends and neighbors and all those whose lives are closely linked to ours. We can be better examples to our children, and our friends. We may never get it completely right, but we can make it better. And we must try, again and again and again.

For when the strife is o'er and the battle done, we will still stand, like our forbearers before us, desperately in need of God's mercy, and also, I suspect, in need of the forgiveness of our children. AMEN